

## THE TEMPEST: A POSTCOLONIAL FEMINIST APPRAISAL

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### ABSTRACT

*The proposed paper is an endeavour to textually analyze William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* as a realistic representation of patriarchal society of contemporary England where women were thought to be nothing but commodities which can be easily exchanged from one owner to another. Shakespeare, consciously or unconsciously propounds leading patriarchal ideologies of contemporary society which cater to the taste of male onlookers. Shakespeare explores the very fundamental reality as to the power politics that is very much prevalent in our society even within the so called pure and sanctified rapport between children and parents.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Textually Analyze, Ideologies of Contemporary Society & Fundamental Reality*

**Received:** Mar 08, 2016; **Accepted:** Mar 22, 2016; **Published:** Mar 28, 2016; **Paper Id.:** IJASRAPR201639

### INTRODUCTION

While textually analyzing *The Tempest*, this paper seeks to explore the controlling of a daughter's personality, liking and disliking, taste and distaste and even sexuality by an authoritative father through the relationship between Miranda and Prospero. Prospero controls every event occurring in life of Miranda from sleeping to waking to her falling in love with a boy. Not only that, he also even constructs her character and personality to fulfill patriarchal interest.

Besides the theme of chastity, the theme of fertility and birth occurs frequently in the play. In this play Shakespeare throws light on the popular belief that woman's sacred responsibility throughout her life is to protect her chastity and virginity for her legitimate husband. She should eventually give birth to her husband's legitimate heirs. The woman who maintains and pursue the path that has been paved by society will be embraced as normal woman otherwise she will be repudiated from our society as an outcast or evil doer. It is found in this drama that Sycorax has breached the rules of the society. The drama also caters to the popular belief that a woman's outward beauty mirrors her inward virtue. This drama through the continuous but implicit contrast between Miranda and Sycorax articulates the contrast between traditional good woman and bad woman.

Another important instance of the oppression of woman by giving them no importance is explored in this drama by the noticeable absence of female characters. No living woman except Miranda is presented on the stage. Miranda's mothers, Prospero's mother, Claribel, Sycorax are only referred to but never appear before us. Among them Sycorax is the most frequently referred to by Prospero, the protagonist himself. She is omnipresent in Prospero's mind but never is presented in appearance. Prospero is quite aware of her existence but he has not seen her also. In reality all the information he gets regarding Sycorax-the witch is provided by Ariel, a spirit. Though, Sycorax is absent, yet the frequent reference to her arouses our interest in her.

The argument of this paper proposes to explore the oppression of women within and outside their family,

the physical and mental controlling by men, their suffocating life and to establish the reason for un-voicing and silencing of all women. The continuous oppression, exploitation, torture and torment of the patriarchal society over women give birth to feminism which subsequently gives rise to feminist theory.

Women are not only oppressed in real life but they are also oppressed in literature. According to the feminist theorists literary texts are an indispensable apparatus on the hand of the dominant strata- male strata to naturalize the unnatural power relation between male and female sects. With the help of the power of representation in literature they serve and protect their interest in our society. The stereotypical representation of the virtuous women, the seductress and the scarifying mother in literature ascertains that these roles are desirable from the girls and the girls must internalize these features in their souls. With regard to this, literature is ideological as it performs a major role in the socialization of the power structure as women give their consent to internalize these roles.

In *The Tempest* we see how patriarchy and colonialism not only suppressed but also omitted the voice of Sycorax. The traditional interpretation of *The Tempest* main focuses on the relationship between Prospero and Caliban belong to the male category. It is also the oppression of patriarchal society on woman that they never can achieve a prominent role not only in the literary works but also in the interpretation of those literary works. The paper is meant to explore critically how Caliban's mother, Sycorax who is the actual owner of the island is internationally silenced.

She is not absent but only from the perspective of her inactive silence. Her representation has been manipulated by the playwright to satisfy patriarchal thirst so as to do this she is constructed in such a way that she becomes an absent figure in the dramatic action. Though Sycorax is invoked frequently in the play, she is invoked only as the disembodied symbol of man's most terrible apprehension. She is invoked only to make us remind of her dispossession but she has never been entertained in the drama to tell her own tale. Almost all the information we come to know as to Sycorax from Prospero- the omnipresent God like figure. Prospero describes Sycorax in misogynistic terms. We come to know that she is a terrible witch who has been banished from his own land because of her evil doings and it is also informed that she has done something good for which her life has been forgiven. She came to the island carrying her child in her womb but the child is not begotten by her legitimate husband but by her illicit affair with devil, Setebos. Prospero acquaints us with wickedness in her nature but Prospero fails to succeed to delineate, knowingly or unknowingly, one single account of her evil-doings. It is Prospero who first refers to Sycorax in order to keep Ariel under his control. This act of Prospero reveals the fact that how man exploits woman to protect their own domination and fulfill their desired purpose. Once it is established that Sycorax was born in Algier. Prospero takes the charge of unfolding her tale with diligence but he fails to or deliberately does not give any detailed description of her evil-doings:

This damn'd witch Sycorax,  
For mischiefs manifold, and sorceries terrible  
To enter human hearing, from Algiers,  
Thou know'st, was banish'd: for one thing she did  
They would not take her life. Is not this true?

(I. ii. 264-265)

Shakespeare does not allow the audience to know the goodness in the nature of the witch. This has been done to construct her absence which subsequently takes the form of voicelessness and it is this voicelessness from which the European writers make the native woman suffer. This gender biased construction of silent female is manifested in the portrayal of all African women in colonial literature.

We can cite the famous works of famed authors like Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* Marjorie Perham's *Major Dane's Garden*, David Cauts *At Fever Pitch*, Margaret Laurance's *This Side Jordan* as in these works women characters have been presented as voiceless, subjugated and marginalized sect in our so called civilized society.

In Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* the native woman is constructed as a formidable and prevalent symbol of frenzied passion but most importantly she is quite incapable of articulating her own feelings and emotions. The description of the native woman's first appearance is the glimpse of the latent powerful apparatus that is deployed for the construction of the women in the societal scenario as a voiceless woman essentially in the case of native women. Though there is a conversation between the native woman and Kurtz but their conversation is never recorded in the novel. Marlowe, the European narrator, says that he can't understand because he does not know the dialect. He also says that he feels happy that Kurtz also can't care for her voice because of his illness. Thus the voice of the native woman remains un-heard and unrecognized in the patriarchal dominated world.

Her face had a tragic and fierce aspect of wild sorrow and pent-up pain mingled with fear of some struggling and half-shaped resolve. She stood looking at us without a stir, like a wilderness itself with an air of brooding over an inscrutable purpose. She looked at us all as if her life had depended upon the unswerving steadiness of her glance. Suddenly she opened her bared arms and threw them up rigid above her head like in an uncontrollable desire to touch the sky and at the same time the swift shadows darted out of the earth, swept around on the river, gathering the steamer in a shadowy embrace. A formidable silence over the scene is prevalent.

It is pertinent to this argument to note the variants of the last line of this paragraph in Conrad's manuscript and in the original magazine publication. The manuscript reads: "the swift shadows darted out of the earth, swept around on the river, gathering the steamer in a shadowy embrace. Her sudden gesture was as startling as a cry but not a sound was heard. The formidable silence of the scene completed the memorable impression" (62; emphasis added). And the magazine reads; "the swift shadows darted out of the earth, swept around on the river, gathering the steamer in a shadowy embrace. Her sudden gesture seemed to demand a cry, but the unbroken silence that hung over the scene was more formidable than any sound could be"(62;emphasis added). The final publication then reads as the first cited version with which we are familiar: The swift shadows darted out of the earth, swept around on the river, gathering a steamer in a shadowy embrace. A formidable silence hung over the scene" (62; emphasis added). I wish to stress that, in successively removing even the appearance of sound from this woman, Conrad strikes at the heart of the matter by replicating the fate of Africans woman's voice in colonial literature. The African woman conjured up out of a void, a fissure or space out of which there can be for her no coherent or comprehensible language; not because it cannot be uttered, but because as Conrad makes quite clear, her language either cannot be heard or cannot be understood--- and it is this singular factor which has had bearing on the representation of black woman in imperial discourse. What makes this silencing all the more emphatic is that this is preciously a work which emphasizes the relating of a story by the man, Marlowe, in which the central character, Kurtz, has been singled out for the power of his voice as his instrument of control.

If we try to find out one single meaningful word from the enunciation of the women characters, we must need a

microscope. She is described as mysterious being, a void, a fissure, who is incapable of uttering any meaningful language not only because she doesn't know any comprehensible, coherent language but because the European are incapable of realizing her language.

The colonial literature not even let the woman express their sorrow cogently and loudly. In this way, Western literature disperses the ideology regarding the mysterious and mystique nature of woman. They remain mysterious because of their forced silencing by the Western authors and this is the repercussion of the power of representation in literature which compels not only the laymen but also the intelligentsias of our society at large to consider them as nothing but a voiceless and trivial subsistence in this world of male domination.

Another prominent example of this sort of native woman's deliberate un-voicing by male white European can be found in Marjorie Perham's *Major Danie's Garden*. The novel records the sexual weakness of Bleaker, the young British officer. But the sexual weakness is caused through the sexual proposal made to him by a native woman named Khedichu. Thus, the male British officer is not blamed but the woman is blamed who caused the man's degradation. But modern readers will find it difficult to accept that an adult man who is otherwise good can commit wrong only because a native woman seduced him. This sexual relation in between Khedichu and the British officer plays a crucial role in the novel and this secret sexual act becomes the reason of all future political and diplomatic crises but in spite of the importance of this sexual act Khedichu's motive is never explained. She remains voiceless in the entire novel. The narrator never allows her to speak for herself. The narrator being the white European reported, very vaguely, what has happened. He never explained what has exactly happened but hinted at and explained the events what he wanted to.

Thus though the narrator admits that Khedichu was a very important lady, the narrator does not have enough courage to give her the right to speak because of the terrible fear in man. To give a native woman her right to speak and her importance in our society is a heresy in male-dominated Euro-centric western world. This story of un-voicing of Khedichu is parallel to Sycorax's story. Prospero refers to Sycorax only to oppress and subjugate Ariel and like her other fictional sister she becomes a symbol of "the dark female" who is mysterious, lecherous and irrational. Therefore the manipulated and prejudiced representation of black woman is never-ending. It begins from an early stage, becomes prominent in colonial literature and also exists in the era of decolonization.

The black woman like Sycorax also symbolizes the native land and the conquest of the native land by white European is synonymous with the rape of black woman for example, we may refer to the work of David Caute's *At Fever Pitch* and Margaret Laurence's *This Side Jordan*

Laurence criticizes the mentality of the white Europeans who consciously or unconsciously think that the conquest of virgin land is synonymous to molestation of a black woman. In Laurence's novel we see that a young girl is gifted to the British hero as bribe because of the myth about native woman that they are licentious and treacherous in nature cannot be pure life woman. The British hero does not consider her to be a virgin woman like any European woman and maidenhead is her most precious jewel and she should protect it. So, he rapes her considering her a prostitute and he feels the same pleasure as a conqueror feels the proud in his soul conquering the native land.

Though Laurence points out the condition of woman in the patriarchal society in this novel by narrating the exchange of this woman and describing her as silenced virgin rather than a prostitute, he also fails to give her a voice. She also was to tolerate the tragedy silently. All these examples prove that the native woman not only have to be sexual but

also have to be silenced, voiceless. They never protest, never tell their own tale but always allow others to interpret their tales and whatever it is, they accept it silently.

The representation of native woman is made by Caute in *At Fever Pitch* in a different way. The protagonist of the novel is a European male representative like any other fictional character in other colonial fictions. But in this fiction Michael Glyn, the British officer is homosexual. He has a servant named Sulley who is also a homosexual until Glyn ravages him. This rape results in his impotence and his only concern now becomes to satisfy his master. Michael Glyn believes that the only way of controlling the native is to make them impotent. Glyn believes that woman can be controlled easily, so he takes up the mission of turning the man into woman and thus establishes domination over them. This act Glyn reveals that woman can be controlled easily and they silently accept the situation when they are controlled. This impotent man Sully not only starts to neglect his wives but also beats them finding no other alternative, the helpless wives have to tolerate the tortures by the impotent man silently. In this way, they support the belief that since birth the women are castrated and they have nothing to do rather to accept the torture caused by the man in 'Silence'.

Almost the entire gamut of Imperial fiction, in this way, constructs the image of dark woman. They are not represented as flesh and blood living human beings but as symbols. They become the symbol of treachery, darkness, mystery and above all voicelessness. In *The Tempest*, Caliban's mother, the black native woman Sycorax, does not teach Caliban to speak. It is the White European male Prospero who teaches Caliban how to speak. This inability of Sycorax to teach her son further establishes the voicelessness of native woman. In *The Tempest* though it is said that Sycorax has given birth to Caliban yet we are unable to get any reference to her motherly attitude. Her son also recalls her for getting the charm of her evil magic. So unlike the nurturing, caring and benevolent European mother, the native mother just "littered" the child and does not care a little for her little ones. Thus the native mother is completely devoid of any maternal affection but all these are myth produced by white European to the native woman. But this representation of black woman is only fictional, constructed deliberately by the white European male authors to justify their act of exploiting them. Their power is dismissed as evil and sorcery as we see in the case of Sycorax, a powerful woman who can even control the moon.

But white male Prospero dismissed her power as evil. Besides, Sycorax controls Ariel who is a male spirit. But to articulate the controlling of man by woman is seemed as a cause of shame for the white man. So Sycorax has to be a witch.

If we read *The Tempest* after freeing ourselves from patriarchal and colonial conversion of reading, we realize that Sycorax is not a witch at all. She is a native woman who may be a rebel and her voice is forcefully silenced because such a woman is a threat for patriarchal society. To prove that the un-voicing of the native woman is only imagined by the European author we may refer to the Igbo woman's war. Igbo woman does not hesitate to articulate their grievance by dancing, singing scurrilous song and often insults the man by questioning his manhood. They also carry sticks with them to invoke the power of female ancestors.

The very out of Igbo woman reveals the fact that the native women are not silent at all. They can play the role of political actors and also capable of telling their own interest. But it is because of the patriarchal society man cannot recognize the female power. They even loathe to record the power of woman. In *The Tempest* we see that Prospero's description of Sycorax's power is imbued with malignity.

The traditional reader and audience have no option but to believe the view points of Prospero and Caliban. This archetypal representation of the native woman is done only to serve the interest of colonial and patriarchal society. There is a comparison between the power of Prospero and the power of Sycorax. By denigrating Sycorax's power as necromancy Prospero actually is paving the path to legitimize his act of usurping Sycorax's native land and prove the ideology that man's power is legal and legitimate. We cannot know whether Prospero is telling the truth or not because Sycorax's voice has been silenced. Though Sycorax is silenced but her power does not die out. It broods over the play all the time because Caliban still invokes it for his own rebellion.

All the charms

Of Sycorax, toods, beetles, bats, light on you!

(I. ii. 339-40)

## CONCLUSIONS

We should not be oblivious about Sycorax but must be diligent to listen to her voice as representing the voice of the other of patriarchy. We should endeavour to find out her speech because even today a woman's outward beauty is a standard tool of judging her virtue. An ugly looking woman like Sycorax is still loathed in this society and just as power of Sycorax is described as evil and witchcraft; likewise, even in modern era the power of woman is described as evil. Powerful and strong willed women especially of the oriental world still remained marginalized and subjugated in society. Therefore it is the emotional obligation on the part of the entire world to try at our level best to find out Sycorax's language and her story.

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